

Readers write

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No to pluralism

The Aug. 21 editorial urging that Jewish educators "promote such communal concerns as pluralism" may not be well founded and, indeed, may be counterproductive if pursued.

The word "pluralism" no longer refers, as it once did, to respecting another's right to worship as he/she sees fit and to treating that person's beliefs and religious leaders with dignity and respect. If that were the meaning of the word today, I would heartily agree with the advice.

Unfortunately, pluralism has developed into a code word that means acceptance of all the principal Jewish religious movements as expressive of "legitimate" Judaism. When used in this manner, it is simply not possible for an Orthodox Jew to teach or accept pluralism.

When one holds fast to the divine origin and binding nature of the written and oral law, as do all Orthodox Jews, one cannot ascribe Judaic "legitimacy" to any religious movement which rejects or deviates from the law. For example, in the context of a contemporary problem, since Orthodox Jews believe that divinely ordained law requires that the identity of a child as a born Jew be derived from the mother, they may not treat as Ju-

daically "legitimate" a view which holds that identity may derive from the father.

According to Rabbi Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University, the "criterion [for legitimacy] is the Jewish *lex*—the halacha." In his words, which would be repeated with conviction by every Orthodox Jew, "I cannot, in the name of unity, assent to a legitimization of what every fiber in my being tells me is in violation of the most sacred precepts of the Torah."

Pluralism in the contemporary sense is simply out of bounds in the yeshiva and Orthodox day school world and in Orthodox adult education programs as well.

Matters of legitimacy and pluralism need not deflect us from pursuing the goal of Jewish unity, however.

Lamm has written and spoken about the clear and unequivocal "functional validity" and "spiritual dignity" of the non-Orthodox movements and their leadership and rabbis. Thus, he refers to the non-Orthodox communities as "vital, powerful and dynamic; they are committed to Jewish survival, each according to its own lights; they are an invaluable part of *K'lal Yisrael*; and they consider their rabbis as their leaders." Non-Orthodox rabbis thus are "valid leaders of the Jewish religious communities," according to Lamm.

He also points out that if non-Orthodox Jews "are sincere, if they believe in God, if they endeavor to carry out the consequences of their faith in a consistent manner—then they are religious people" and have spiritual dignity.

For purposes of communal unity, need there be more? It may well be sufficient, and would represent a substantial positive development, if Orthodox leaders were to acknowledge readily the validity and spiritual dignity of non-Orthodox religious leaders, demonstrate a willingness to treat non-Orthodox religious leaders with respect and sit and act in harmony with them to the maximum possible within halacha to achieve common goals for the Jewish people. Such interaction should not be avoided, whether in the context of federations, community relations councils, boards of rabbis or the Synagogue Council of America. (I specifically refer to the Synagogue Council because, at the present, there are great pressures from the Orthodox Union to cause its withdrawal from the SCA, which would be devastating to Jewish unity in America.)

Interaction and respect, even in the contexts of interdenominational rabbinical boards and synagogue councils, do not in any way confer legitimacy except in the eyes of persons who seem to look for issues where there are non-issues.

The editorial also draws an unflattering distinction between Jewish ritual and "the moral and ethical underpinnings of Judaism." Since Orthodox Jews take more seriously than most the ritual mitzvot,

the editorial might be viewed as principally directed to Orthodoxy.

I have never observed that any movement in Judaism has an "exclusive" on morality and ethics or cares more for morality and ethics than other movements. There are two tablets of the Ten Commandments. Both tablets and all the mitzvot require meticulous attention and care, which, I believe, is the point the editorial is making, and with which I agree.

Arthur C. Silverman
New York, N.Y.